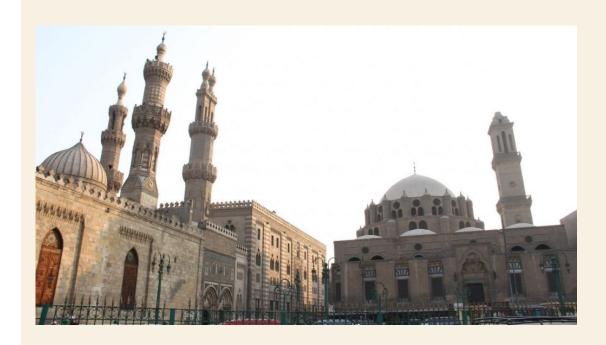
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Muhammad 'Abduh: Leading 19th Century Modernist Reformer

Mufti Abdullah Moolla • October 27, 2022



This essay is part of the Religious Reformers

Series. By studying the past attempts to reform traditional Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc., we can better fight against the contemporary programs to reform our Deen.

Islamic Modernism emerged in the Arab World with great force during the mid-nineteenth century. The founders of this modernist movement include Muḥammad 'Abduh (1905), Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī (1897), [1] and Rashīd Riḍā (1935). Islāmic Modernism, in the simplest of terms, is the attempt to remove Islām from orthodoxy and replace it with reforms that would make it adaptable to a modern western society.

For some, the Modernism of Muḥammad 'Abduh consisted of creating a synthesis of Islām and modern thought. Others felt that it was a bridge he built between the old world and the new. [2] One aspect of his Modernism was giving preference to a marriage of civilizations, rather than a clash of civilizations. [3]

Muḥammad 'Abduh was born in 1849 to a father of Turkish lineage and an Egyptian mother. His father hailed from an elite ruling family and his mother came from the Ashrāf. The exact birthplace of Muḥammad 'Abduh is not known. He grew up in the village of Mahallat Nasr, one of the many small villages around the fertile Delta area stretching from the Mediterranean coast to Cairo. [4]

Early Life

After completing memorization of the Noble Qur'ān a year earlier, he commenced his formal studies in 1862, aged 13, at the Mosque of Aḥmad al-Badawī in the town of Tanta.^[5]

He ran away from school and married.

He enrolled at Al-Azhar University in 1866 at the age of 17. Here he studied Logic, Philosophy, and Mysticism. He was a practicing sūfī at Al-Azhar. It was during his stay at Al-Azhar that he met Jamāl

al-Dīn Afghānī (1869).

He studied under Jamāl al-Dīn Afghanī, promoter of pan-Islāmism to resist European Colonialism. Afghānī had influenced 'Abduh, convincing him to adopt journalism and impressed upon him the technological achievements of the West. 'Abduh began teaching at Al-Azhar in 1877 (the very same year in which he obtained the 'Ālimiyyah diploma). He utilized his influence in various publications in order to spread his 'reforms.'

Muḥammad 'Abduh was appointed as one of three editors of *Al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyyah* in 1880. He wrote editorials in which he expressed social questions, rather than political ones. He expressed positions which were novel and daring, but later became generally accepted amongst Muslims. He wrote on the importance of education; he attacked religious innovation; and he targeted polygamy. ^[6]

'Abduh had joined Afghānī (who was also a keen

Freemason and a member of the *Kawkab al-Sharq* lodge) in Paris during 1884, after the British had banished him from Egypt for 6 years in 1882.

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The Background Behind His Banishment

There was discontentment with the khedive in Muḥammad 'Abduh's circle. This resulted in military officers gathering around colonel 'Urābī, to usurp power from the khedive. The 'Urābī revolt was quashed by the British and the French in 1882, and 'Abduh was exiled for his involvement in the rebellion. [7] The 'Urābī revolt was against the Turko-circassian officers and developed into a revolution.

In 1884, 'Abduh joined Afghānī in Paris, and they

started a journal called *Al-'Urwat al-Wuthqā*. This journal was anti-colonial and urged Muslims to join together and stand up against foreign domination.

In *Al-'Urwat al-Wuthqā*, Muḥammad 'Abduh did not stress upon the aspects of Islām which the vast majority of the preachers and scholars would. Instead, he stressed upon and emphasized those parts of Islām that were compatible with, or could be made to be compatible with, his and Afghānī's political programme: intellectual and moral reform of the individual; solidarity against European imperialism; and an end to despotic government (with an exception for Sulṭān 'Abd al-Ḥamīd).^[8]

Within this publication, he made novel interpretations of the Noble Qur'ān, such as his usage of verse 3:103 to push political unity:

And hold firmly to the rope of Allāh all together, and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allāh upon you—

when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allāh make clear to you His verses that you may be guided.

Muhammad 'Abduh stated that the prohibition of taking disbelievers as awliyā' in the Noble Qur'ān 60:1 applied only to relations between the Muslims at the time of Rasūlullāh (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) and the disbelievers in Makkah who at first opposed the Messenger of Allāh, and that it was not to be applied generally.

O you who have believed, do not take My enemies and your enemies as allies, extending to them affection while they have disbelieved in what came to you of the truth, having driven out the Prophet and yourselves [only] because you believe in Allāh, your Rabb. If you have come out for

jihād [i.e., fighting or striving] in My cause and seeking means to My approval, [take them not as friends]. You confide to them affection [i.e., instruction], but I am most knowing of what you have concealed and what you have declared. And whoever does it among you has certainly strayed from the soundness of the way.

Al-'Urwat al-Wuthqā attacked the entire class of 'Ulamā' at the time.

Muḥammad 'Abduh made a friendly alliance with Wilfred Blunt (a Christian) while fighting khedival despotism. It should be noted that this was happening at the very same time when he was utilizing this verse (60:1) to prohibit such friendships!^[9]

While abroad in France, he became disillusioned with the insistence of Afghānī that Muslims should cast off foreign rule. He began to believe that,

based on the current weak state of the Muslims, such an endeavor was impossible. He gave up his anti-colonial stance and declared that, for the time being, Muslims have no alternative but to submit to the European empires. [10]

After having traveled to Britain and Tunisia, he returned to Beirut where he was accompanied by scholars from different religious and theological backgrounds. While here, he worked on strengthening ties between Islām, Christianity, and Judaism. In order to do this, he founded an association, and this was done in cooperation with Mirza Muḥammad Bāqir, a Persian friend of Afghānī.

Muḥammad 'Abduh was in contact with Reverend Isaac Taylor. In a private correspondence, 'Abduh told Taylor that Islām and Christianity agreed upon much more than they disagreed on; and that although both religions had departed from what they were meant to be, 'true religion exists through

all the religions.' 'Abduh also felt that 'the two great religions, Christianity and Islām, would respect each other and take each other's hand.' According to Taylor, the expectation of their venture was not just that Christianity and Islām would come to appreciate each other but that there would also emerge 'one pure faith which all will be able to accept.' [12]

During his time in Britain he was introduced to leading politicians, including Randolph Churchill (the father of Winston Churchill).

Support of Cromer

The attempt at modernizing Islām was carried out by abusing positions of influence. At this point, it is essential to note the role played by Evelyn Baring, 1st Earl of Cromer, (1841-1917) in the life of Muḥammad 'Abduh.

Cromer was brought from India by the British in

order to administer occupied Egypt. Cromer used his experience in India and desired to exert British influence in Egypt by restructuring Islāmic education so as to incorporate Western ideas.

These progressive ideas would then be mixed into religious doctrine and in turn produce a reformed—or, deformed—version of Islām. Cromer found the ideal ally for his aims and aspirations in Muḥammad 'Abduh. [13]

Cromer's support opened up opportunities for Muḥammad 'Abduh to promote his ideas. Muḥammad 'Abduh was given a platform in the newspapers; a spot on the state committee for reforming education at Al-Azhar Mosque; and appointed as the state Muftī. (t is quite telling that Cromer believed 'Abduh was secretly an agnostic rather than a genuine Muslim. [14]

Muḥammad 'Abduh's appointment as the Grand Muftī of Egypt was in 1899. He issued liberal judgements, like authorizing Muslims to receive

interest and dividends; declaring that Muslims could eat the meat of animals slaughtered by non-Muslims while living in non-Muslim countries; and if the occasion arose, Muslims could wear clothes other than their traditional garb. [15] These views endeared him to the British.

One of the immediate tasks of 'Abduh after having been appointed Grand Muftī was to reform the Sharī'ah court system. The main idea proposed by 'Abduh was that the judgements of the Sharī'ah Courts should be made the task of the National Court system, thus judges should be trained for this, and the Sharī'ah was to be codified—meaning a modern law code similar to that of the National Courts was to be prepared in order to replace the Sharī'ah. [16]

The movement of Muḥammad 'Abduh and Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī differs from the current Salafi Movement, but this is understandable because the attempt to modernize Islām will always be met with

a strong and bold reaction, causing the Modernists to change their course of action every hour. This of course leads to divided reactions among them, resulting in splinter groups.

Modernists attempted to reform Islām by adopting a reinterpretation of the Islāmic texts; abandoning the positions of the traditional schools of figh; and replacing all of this with broad appeals to Magāṣid Al-Sharī'ah, which was expanded and detailed by Islāmic reformists and modernists in various parts of the world. The aḥādīth were restricted by means of severe hadīth criticism, causing many traditional practices of Muslims in different parts of the world to wither away and fade into oblivion. For example, Abduh had argued that the hadith should be used much more carefully than was generally the case. Only those whose authenticity was beyond a shadow of doubt should be accepted, while also ensuring that they either made sense, or were at least understood in a way that made sense.[17]

RELATED: The Maqasid of the Shari`ah: Nuanced Application or Genuine Abuse?

Muḥammad 'Abduh felt that latter-day Muslims are entitled to perform ijtihad. Since this is the case, they are entitled to radically reinterpret all Islāmic texts in such a way that it aligns with so-called scientific and moral progress.

He utilized the following principle for this: when reason seems to conflict with the literal meaning of scriptural texts, precedence must be given to reason. According to 'Abduh, this meant that when the scientific and moral progress generated by reason conflicts with the literal meaning of the texts, these texts should be reinterpreted in such a way as to be consistent with progress.

For example, 'Abduh argues that scriptural references to the jinn should be interpreted as references to microbes, which are discovered through scientific progress. [18] 'Abduh promoted a

scientific worldview. He argued for naturalistic, non-miraculous understandings of events in the Noble Qur'ān. For example, he alleged that references to angels may be referring to 'natural forces'; references to the seven heavens may be referring to 'seven planets.' He argued that the stones that destroyed the army in *Sūrat al-Fīl* referred to microbes, probably smallpox. 'Abduh defended Darwin and argued that Darwinian 'natural selection' was a device used by Allāh Ta'ālā, citing 2:251:

And if it were not for Allāh checking [some] people by means of others, the earth would have been corrupted, but Allāh is full of bounty to the worlds.

Muḥammad 'Abduh met with a number of European thinkers such as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Gustave le Bon, Herbert Spencer, and Tolstoy. He had also corresponded with them. [19] In the light of the Aḥādīth, we are taught to be very careful of

those we associate with. The effects of these scholars on Muḥammad 'Abduh cannot be denied—it led to heresy and innovation from which resulted a tremendous amount of damage.

Once again, it is very telling that Wilfrid Scawen Blunt joked about the religious laxity of Muḥammad 'Abduh and his eagerness to cast aside traditional Islāmic norms for the sake of assisting the British in 'civilizing the East.' [20]

Muḥammad 'Abduh felt that Muslims should not be held back by the interpretations of classical scholars, rather they should utilize their reason and thought in order to keep up with the times. 'Abduh said that the two greatest tools man has been given are: independence of will and independence of thought and opinion. With the aid of these two, man can acquire happiness. 'Abduh believed that the growth and advancement of Europe was based on these two principles. We find herein the harmony in thought between Muḥammad 'Abduh

and other Western Modernists.

At the age of 28, Muhammad 'Abduh had joined a Masonic lodge. [21] Although he professed to being a Muslim, he took his Freemasonry very seriously. [22] In line with Masonic principles, he also preached unity of religion. When asked why he became a Mason, he claimed that it was for political and social reasons.

Traditional 'Ulamā' like Shaykh Muḥammad 'Illīsh al-Mālikī declared Muḥammad 'Abduh to be an innovator. [23] 'Abduh's followers however felt he was a reviver and reforming leader. Others considered him to be an infidel. [24] He preached for harmony between Sunnis and Shi'ites. He paid special attention to forging friendships between Muslims and Christians.

Despite his open heresy, we still find that some authors such as Kāmil Al-Shinnawī described the life of Muḥammad 'Abduh as a 'combination of the

life of a prophet and that of a hero.' [25] We seek refuge in Allāh Ta'ālā and ask Him to protect us from ever uttering such filth.

Muḥammad 'Abduh drew heavily from the philosophical works of Aristotle, Ibn Sina, and other French authors. One of the glaring heresies of Muḥammad 'Abduh is his application of reason in the explanation of the verses of the Noble Qur'ān, similar to the Mu'tazila. In his work, Risālat al-Tawḥīd, 'Abduh argues that it is possible for basic Islāmic teachings to be established through reason, without recourse to the authority of scripture. [26]

In his *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, Muḥammad 'Abduh pushes his modernist ideas and explains the Noble Qur'ān using his own reason and supposed rationality. [27]

Risālat al-Tawḥīd can be viewed as being the manifesto of modernist Islām. This book draws from the ideas of Guizot and the 'progressive'

views Muḥammad 'Abduh had gleaned from Afghānī, which he refined later on. [28]

Muḥammad 'Abduh targeted the 'Ulamā' and criticized them unflinchingly. He had described the 'Ulamā' as follows:

They were completely indifferent to the superior interests of their country. Except the commentaries and super-commentaries on old texts, which they understood badly and explained even more badly, they occupied themselves with nothing.

Ignorant of the needs and aspirations of their time, they lived almost on the fringe of society. [29]

From this, it seems Muḥammad 'Abduh laid the foundation for the masses to turn against the traditional 'Ulamā'. These ideas are promoted and held onto dearly by Modernists and Liberals to this very day. To Allāh do we turn for aid and guidance.

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Muḥammad 'Abduh summarized his program for reform and deform in three spheres. Social, religious, and philosophical. On the social front, Muḥammad 'Abduh promoted female education and gender equality. Qāsim Amīn, a colleague of Muḥammad 'Abduh, spent all his efforts in the defence of feminism within Egypt. This led to a journal called *The Unveiled (Al-Sufūr)*, which was aimed at spreading Feminism, and soon enough, in 1918 women were marching in the streets in front of men. Muḥammad 'Abduh, in promoting his new moral education made the following statements:

"We hope to give our daughters an education worthy of those who will be called on to take responsibilities equal to those of men."

"It is an unpardonable crime to leave

women in a state of ignorance and mediocrity."[30]

On the religious front, Rashīd Riḍā, the disciple of Muḥammad 'Abduh, had exerted himself in spreading the thoughts of his teacher. Rashīd Riḍā founded *Al-Manār*, a journal in which he spoke about reforming textbooks and teaching methods. He had also criticized various customs and innovations that had entered into Islāmic practice. While his idea of criticizing innovation was a good one, in the process of doing so he was serving the very cause of innovation.

Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq promoted the philosophy of Muḥammad 'Abduh. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq was educated in Sorbonne, France, the birthplace of Modernism. He then completed his education in Lyon. He returned to Egypt and became the General Secretary of Al-Azhar University. He authored a number of works and preached the tolerance and love of fellow men.

Muḥammad 'Abduh exerted influence over the courts, where he promoted talfīq^[31] and the abandonment of taqlīd. This is obviously problematic because it severs the connection Muslims have with the authentic Sunna as it has been passed down through a system of taqlīd and sanad, and it opens the door to blameworthy innovation and reform in the religion. Furthermore, a Muslims would grow up adhering to a certain practice and principle, but upon a judgement from the court, they would be forced into practicing something different.

It is also important to note that Muḥammad 'Abduh had no legal experience whatsoever, yet he was still appointed as a judge regardless of this fact. [33]

The following incident indicates clearly the hatred and antagonism that Modernism ingrains within a person towards traditional Islāmic knowledge and practice.

One spokesman against the reform of Al-Azhar was Shaykh Al-Buhayri, who in a heated argument disputed 'Abduh's views on Al-Azhar by reminding him that the institution continued to produce men with keen intellect and considerable knowledge, 'Abduh among them. The argument went as follows:

Al-Buhayri asked 'Abduh, "Do you not know that you are an Azhari, and yet, you have ascended to where you are on the stairs to knowledge and have become a brilliant scholar?"

'Abduh responded: "If I have a portion of true knowledge, as you mention, I got it through ten years of sweeping the dirt of Azhari knowledge from my brain and to this day it is not as clean as it should be." [34]

It is very hurtful to the Muslim Ummah to know that

Muhammad 'Abduh tacitly endorsed British rule in Egypt and explicitly endorsed French rule in North Africa. Muhammad 'Abduh travelled to Algeria and Tunisia. Muhammad 'Abduh mentioned that the Algerians and Tunisians should 'make peace with the [imperial French] government and leave off engaging in politics.' He further asserted, 'by submitting to French rule and surrendering all their political rights, the Algerians and Tunisians will placate the French and win good treatment from them. Accordingly, the French will help them with the 'civilization of their lands' and will allow them to study all forms of knowledge, both religious and non-religious.'[35]

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What Is the Aim of a Reformer?

Muhammad 'Abduh is reported to have said:

The aim of religious reform is to direct the belief of the Muslims in such a way as to make them better morally and also to improve their social condition. To set religious beliefs right, to put an end to errors, consequent upon misunderstanding religious texts, so well that, once the beliefs are fortified, actions will be more in conformity with morality; such is the task of the Muslim reformer.^[36]

To paraphrase, this simply means that Muhammad 'Abduh attempted to change the belief system of the Muslims to conform to modernity and to corrupt their religious practices, rendering them devoid of any value and spirituality. The modern world is suffering from a crisis in morality. Hence, the morality Muḥammad 'Abduh attempted to establish was simply supplanting the lofty Islāmic moral system with a bankrupt model of heresy and feminism.

One will notice a trend amongst the reformers—or, deformers—like Muḥammad 'Abduh. They all used some journal, or, periodical, or, newspaper to spread their ideas and deviation. In this day and age, we have means such as websites and social media, which we can effectively use to defend Islām and the truth. Rather than being swept away by the waves of falsehood, we should try our very best to spread goodness and uplift the Muslim Ummah through informing and educating.

The common factor with these reformers and deformers is that they all have some sideline humanitarian or charity work that cloaks their heresy and spreading of confusion. Muslims must be well-aware of this trick and always remain vigilant. The same trick is employed by the Qādiyānīs today. In the case of Muḥammad 'Abduh, he had founded the *Islāmic Benevolent Society*, aimed at spreading education and providing moral and material aid to the poor class.

The main objective of this *Islāmic Benevolent*Society was to set up schools where the poorer classes might have a basic education on the modern European model, without foreign languages. By 1905, the *Islāmic Benevolent*Society had established 7 schools in total and was catering for 770 children. [38]

As we look further into the life of Muḥammad 'Abduh, we understand that he was the fountainhead of many other *isms* related to Modernism. Each of them has their own branches, problems, and issues. These branches have split into many independent problems which we will be spending months and years dealing with. The ideal in a case like this, is to target the godfather of them all. We ask the help of Allāh Ta'ālā in dealing with heresy and its corollaries. The support of the Muslim Ummah in cases like this is absolutely crucial. Help in dealing with Modernism is very valuable. Some within the Muslim Ummah tends to

shoot down those who try to awaken them from their slumber and negligence. We can only complain to Allāh Ta'ālā.

Modernism comes up like the bubbles in the bathtub. When we poke them and they explode, their hollow reality is exposed. Man tends to look at the shine and shape of the bubble. When he is told the shine is only temporary and fake, he becomes angry. However, when he sees the bubble burst, his eyes open up to the reality and he becomes grateful.

Modernism creates discord and disunity, and it leads people towards following their desires. And ultimately, following the desires of the nafs is a path only to the hell-fire.

On March 19, 1905, 'Abduh resigned from the *Azhar Administrative Council* and the *Council for Endowments*. In some part, this was due to pressure from the khedive. He fell ill and aged 56,

he died on July 11, 1905, from cancer of the kidney. He was buried in *Mujawirin Cemetery*. One of the people who attended the funeral was Aḥmad Shafīq Pasha, a lawyer and prominent courtier. When he returned from the funeral, the khedive addressed him and said:

But don't you realize that this man was the enemy of Allāh, the enemy of the Messenger, the enemy of religion, the enemy of the 'Ulamā', the enemy of the Muslims, and the enemy of himself?^[39]

May Allāh Ta'ālā deal with Muḥammad 'Abduh as he deserves to be dealt with, and may He save us from falling victim to his heretical Modernist ideas. Āmīn.

Notes

Books authored by 'Abduh

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- At-Ta'līqāt 'alā Sharḥ al-Dawānī li 'l-Aqā'id al-Adudiyyah
- 3. Falşafat al-ljtimā' wa 'l-Tārīkh
- 4. Risālat al-Tawḥīd

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Footnotes

 Although he is known as Afghānī, many scholars believe that he was in fact a Persian Shi'ī. See:

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jamal-al-Din-al-Afghani 个

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- 31. Mixing the rulings of the four recognized and accepted schools of Fiqh, i.e., Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbalī. ↑
- 32. Following and holding onto one school of Fiqh, without delving into discussions on proofs and

- related details. 个
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